

MEDICAL NUMISMATIC NOTES, VI:
THE BELGIAN SOCIAL WELFARE
CRISIS OF 1857

During the last four years the *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* has contained occasional notes¹ which describe and depict coins, tokens, and medallions of medical and paramedical interest. The present instalment is the sixth of the series.

The medal that is now to be described has to do with social welfare, a subject which pandemic human suffering has driven from the periphery of medical thought to a place not far from the center. New misery has multiplied old relevance.

In 1857 the prime minister of the Kingdom of Belgium was Pierre de Decker (1812-1891), who had come into office three years previously by forming a coalition of moderate Catholics and Progressives. In 1857 de Decker's government introduced a bill² which purported to establish what was called liberty of charity (*liberté de la charité*). The problem is described as follows by the world-famous historian Henri Pirenne³:

A draft of a welfare law, proposed during that same year [1857] by the ministry was to dispel the last illusions of the moderates. Since 1847 the question of charitable foundations had put the Catholics and the Liberals at loggerheads. The Liberals, conforming to legislation introduced into the country by the French Republic and Empire, claimed for the bureaus of welfare exclusively the administration of funds set aside for the poor. The Catholics insisted that in this area the wishes of the donors should dominate. In actual practise and despite the wording of the law, their tenet had been generally accepted since 1830. Without

1. *Bull. N.Y. Acad. Med.* 45:512-514, 1969; 45:637-39, 1969; 45:1124-25, 1969; 46:448-50, 1970; 47:1130-31, 1971.

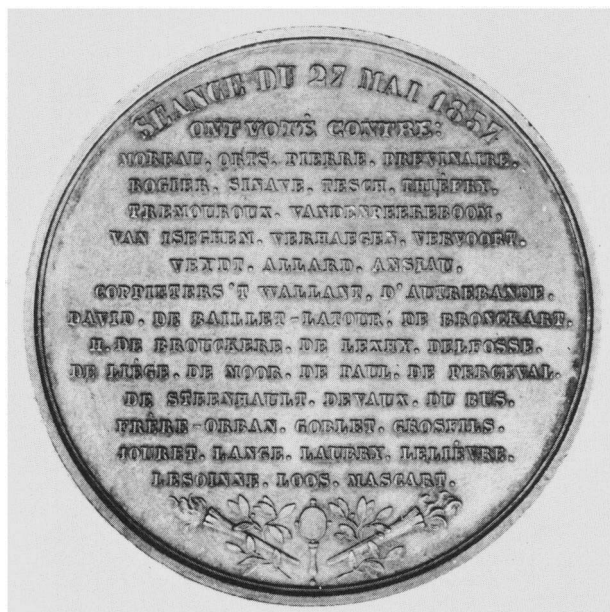
2. Detailed legislative history of the bill is given in Hymans, L.: *Histoire Parlementaire de la Belgique de 1831 à 1880*. Brussels, Bruylant-Christophe, 1878-1913, vol. 3, pp. 377-81. Comment will be found in Mishaegen, G. Guyot de: *Le Parti Catholique Belge de 1830 à 1884*. Louvain, Université Catholique, 1946, pp. 109-11.

3. Pirenne, H.: *Historire de Belgique*. Brussels, Lamertin, 1908-1932, 7 vols. The passage quoted appears in vol. 7, p. 184 ff. Translation by S.J.

For an extended appreciation of Pirenne see Thomson, James W.: *A History of Historical Writing*. New York, Macmillan, 1942, vol. 2, pp. 436-38.



Medal commemorating the debates in the Belgian parliament concerning the Social Welfare Bill of 1857. Author's collection. *Obverse* (above): dedication by Liberals of Charleroi. *Reverse* (below): Names of 41 Liberal deputies who voted against the bill on May 27, 1857. Photographs by American Numismatic Society.



abolishing the statutes the authorities had permitted them to be bypassed.

Pirenne observes that this tolerant policy was especially advantageous to the Catholic Church, since the great majority of donors and legators wanted their testamentary benefactions to be administered by the clergy or by religious orders.

The clash of opinions on this issue not only upset the management of the public charities but produced disturbances which spread through the entire kingdom. The social welfare bill presented by de Decker's ministry in 1857 was intended to conciliate the conflicting factions. Testators, in establishing a charitable foundation, would be permitted to select its administrators but the latter would be supervised strictly by government agencies.

The Liberals⁴ attacked these proposals as an abandonment of the gains which the French Revolution had earned and as a dangerous invitation to limitless growth of the Church, which ultimately might come to hold most of the national wealth in mortmain.⁵

The ministerial measure began to be debated vigorously and frequently in the Belgian legislature on March 18, 1857. On May 20 the deputies decided to discuss Articles 71 and 78 of the bill, which dealt with the assignment of special administrators. The two provisions were debated again on May 22, 23, 25, and 26.⁶ On May 27, amid tempestuous scenes, Articles 71 and 78 were defeated by a vote of 60 to 41.

A bronze medal in my collection commemorates the incident, which was so important in the social history of Belgium and so significant of the problems of modern society in much of the civilized world.

The medal (see illustration) has a diameter of 59 mm. and is 5 mm. thick at the rim. The slightly convex obverse displays at its center the arms of Charleroi—a sword-bearing lion; above, a fleur-de-lis; these designs are enclosed in a pentahedral border and are surmounted by a crown ornamented with seven pearls.⁷ Upon this background the following inscription appears in capital letters:

4. Comment on Belgian liberalism by the illustrious Emile Faguet will be found in Wilmotte, M.: *La Belgique Morale et Politique (1830-1900)*. Paris, Colin, n.d., pp. vi-xiii.

5. Pirenne, op. cit., p. 185.

6. Detailed daily summaries are given by Hymans, op. cit., pp. 379-380.

7. Details in Gevaert, E.: *Heraldique des Provinces Belges*. Brussels, Vromant, 1918, p. 98.

AUX REPRÉSENTANTS QUI ONT VOTÉ CONTRE
LES ARTICLES 71 ET 78 DU PROJET DE LOI SUR
LES ÉTABLISSEMENTS DE BIENFAISANCE, LES
LIBÉRAUX DE L' ARR[ONDISSEMENT] DE CHAR-
LEROI.

The reverse of the medal reads: SÉANCE DU 27 MAI 1857 ONT VOTÉ CONTRE: followed by the names of the 41 deputies who supported the cause of the Liberals. Of the persons whose names appear in this list the most eminent are J. J. W. Frère-Orban (1812-1898) and C. Rogier; both men are regarded as notable figures in Belgian politics and history.

The sequel of the legislative contest may be summarized briefly. After the voting on May 27, 1857 there were riots in the major cities of Belgium. The government withdrew the welfare bill and on June 12 the parliamentary session ended. Eventually, on December 10, a new election was held; of 108 parliamentary seats, 70 were now occupied by liberals. The new liberal cabinet was headed by Rogier, but the most influential figure was Frère-Orban. Both men are commemorated in the medal.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Grateful acknowledgments are made of information and assistance received from Mr. J. Lambert of the Bibliothèque Royale Albert Ier, Brussels; from the American Numismatic Society; and from Mrs. C. M. North and Miss I. Schwager.

S. J.